

‘Conceptions of Inclusion and Inclusive Education: a Critical Examination of the Perspectives and Practices of Teachers in England.’

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Astract

This paper details the development and operation of a system of inclusive education in England during the latter part of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st Century. Through the employment of a literature review and in-depth semi-structured interviews the study sought to determine how teachers defined and operationalised inclusive education in their schools. The study's conclusion details that although many teachers had struggled to understand and operationalise inclusion they had tried very hard to make this initiative work for them, their pupils and their schools. Where inclusion had been most successful was in schools where levels of training were high and ones in which the ethos was positive and supportive of this important educational initiative.

Key Words

Inclusion, Disability, Special Educational Needs, Integration

Introduction

In England, the past thirty years have observed a change in special education not least in respect to the evolution of inclusive educational practice (Hodkinson, 2007; 2009). In 1997, New Labour swept to power on a tidal wave of educational rhetoric and a commitment to reform the manner in which children with special educational needs (SEN) and/ or disabilities were to be educated within England (Hodkinson, 2005). The inclusion strategy made it clear that all teachers would be required to identify and meet the needs of pupils with SEN within mainstream schools (Barber & Turner, 2007). Indeed, in 2001, this requirement was formalised within a Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) when government placed the ball for meeting the needs of children with SEN firmly in the court of mainstream teachers (Ellins and Porter, 2005). Over the last decade this strategy has led, in terms of learners, to classrooms in England becoming more heterogeneous and this in turn has brought considerable challenges for teachers. However, whilst the literature base

leaves one in no doubt that inclusion has gained status within our educational system it also suggests there is a tension in how inclusion is defined and operationalised by government agencies and educational practitioners (Hornby, 2002).

The aim of the paper is firstly to review how inclusion became defined and operationalised during the period of the New Labour government. Second, the paper examines and critically discusses the barriers that served to stall this important educational initiative. Finally the findings from a small-scale research study which critically examined how practitioners defined, interpreted and operationalised inclusive education within the confines of their own classrooms and individual schools are outlined.

Inclusion: the difficulties of definition

Defining inclusion: terminological ambiguity and conceptual confusion

New Labour conceptualised inclusion in terms of the education of all children with SEN and/ or disabilities and non-disabled children within the same neighbourhood of schools (Hodkinson, 2007; Hodkinson & Deverokonda, 2010). Other authors, for example Judge (2003), forward definitions suggesting that for the government inclusion referred to the teaching of all pupils together regardless of any weaknesses they might display (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009). These forms of definitions are though problematic as they refer to nothing more than locational inclusion or indeed shackle need to societal views of disability and thereby do not promote positive attitudes towards all children. Perhaps of most importance is that definitions employing weakness and disability are patronising because they have cultural loading which by employing the language of deficit do not instil pride and respect but refer to individuals who society observe as not-able because of impairment. Such definitions, therefore, do not promote inclusion but conversely encourage the return to integration and thereby tolerance not inclusion of children with SEN.

Defining inclusion: academic peformativity

Most recently, and perhaps most problematic is that inclusion became defined by governmental agents of accountability and standards. For example, Ofsted (2000) whilst stating inclusion was more than a concern for any one group of pupils did nonetheless formulate a set of targets to judge schools. To Ofsted an inclusive school is one where the teaching and learning, achievement, attitudes and well-being of every person matter.

Of interest though is that a former Secretary of State for Education stated that

...we need to do much more to help children with special educational needs to achieve as well as they can, not least if we are to meet the challenging targets expected at school.
(Charles Clarke, DfES, 2004, p. 16)

Such statements made it clear that policies of inclusion operated within a regime of accountability (Allan, 2003). The question here is whether inclusion should ever have been determined by academic standards or by the metrics of accountability. The tension here was that by linking inclusion to accountability schools, whose reputation and financial viability were dependent upon surface success (Hanko, 2003,) became wary of accepting children whose low attainment and discipline depressed examination scores (Fredrickson & Cline, 2002).

Inclusion, then, due to the policies of New Labour became a term subject to conceptual confusion and terminological ambiguity. However, other significant barriers also served to stall the development of this important educational initiative.

The current position: examination of the barriers to inclusive education

An examination of New Labour's policy suggests that barriers to inclusive education were to be found within the locus of the school and that the responsibility for overcoming these barriers was solely in the hands of teachers (DfES, 2004). Hodkinson (2008) though suggests New Labour's viewpoint was contrived and somewhat simplistic observing that in practice many of the barriers to effective inclusion were actually located within the loci of government as well as in schools.

Inclusion and the locus of the government

Inclusion is essentially a political process (Booth et al., 2000) and New Labour pursued a powerful inclusion stance through a top down implementation approach (Coles & Hancock, 2002). New Labour though while well-versed in the language of inclusion was, through its implementation of policy, responsible for many of the barriers that stalled its evolution. For example, New Labour had us believe that inclusion ensured that educational provision offered an opportunity for every child to achieve their full potential. However, in reality one should question whether this was New Labour's only motivation for including all children in mainstream education? It seems reasonable to argue that it was not. To support this contention one need only examine a previous Minister of Education's words in relation to Curriculum 2000;

...the education of children with special educational needs...is vital to the creation of a fully inclusive society ...We owe it to all children ... to develop to their full potential and contribute economically and play a full part as active citizens.

David Blunkett, (2000, cited in Judge, 2003, p 163).

Blunkett's statement is interesting because inclusion here is employed with the caveat of economics. Inclusion in these terms whilst promoting a route to equality of opportunity for all was also about providing functionalist support for a productive economy and sustainable development (DfES, 1999).

Another barrier to inclusion was the curriculum and teaching practices promoted by New Labour. Whilst the government promoted inclusion through policies such as personalised education inclusive education did not square with policies such as the more selective education promoted within the white paper (DfES, 2005). Nor did they mesh with a National Curriculum and Strategies which placed emphasis on the whole class teaching of literacy and numeracy (Judge, 2003).

For some a further tension within New Labour's inclusion policies was they simply did not go far enough. Whilst the government were committed to inclusion they stopped short of a commitment to full inclusion by not closing all the special schools (Frederickson & Cline, 2002). This apparent lack of commitment should not be seen as a barrier to effective inclusive education. Indeed, by stopping short of full inclusion the government was, in reality, advocating inclusion by choice (Tod, 2002) The premise of inclusion by choice is important especially if one considers research which suggests some children do not want to be forced into mainstream placements (Norwich & Kelly, 2004).

Inclusion and the locus of the school

Inclusion and Initial Teacher training in England

Currently, most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) develop their SEN programmes in an 'ad hoc manner' (Moran, 2007, p. 124) with training being grounded upon 'the philosophy of particular institutions rather than on student teachers' entitlement' (Jones, 2006, p. 105). Despite some evidence of students' positive experiences of SEN during teaching practice (Lambe, 2007) the weight of evidence suggests that HEIs are not preparing teachers adequately (see Hodkinson, 2009).

In 2007, the Teacher Development Agency [TDA] responded to the training issues that had been outlined within New Labour's 2004 inclusion road map (DfES, 2004) by introducing new standards for the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). Three of these standards related to SEN:

Q18 – understand how children and young people develop and that the progress and well-being of learners are affected by a range of developmental, social, religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic influences

Q19 – know how to make effective personalised provision for those they teach including those for whom English is an additional language or who have special educational needs or disabilities, and how to take practical account of diversity and promote equality and inclusion in their teaching

Q20 – know and understand the role of colleagues with specific responsibility including those with responsibility for

learners with SEN and disabilities and other individual learning needs (TDA, 2007a, p. 2)

While the government believed these standards were an important vehicle for the development of trainees' knowledge of SEN and disability issues (Adonis, 2007) did these standards actually lead to NQTs feeling more confident in their ability to identify and address the personalised learning needs of all pupils? The evidence suggests that they did not because they still promoted a 'technicist approach' (Pearson, 2007, p. 26) of auditable competencies rather than the values of the pedagogical principles that underpin effective SEN practice. Furthermore, these standards were not a radical departure from those that have been detailed previously (Hodkinson, 2009). Evidence from a NQT survey (TDA, 2007b) suggested that although there had been a small increase in trainees' preparedness to teach children with SEN some 48 per cent still felt unprepared to do so.

Of more concern is that other researches which asked more detailed questions of trainees, than those of the NQT survey, painted a pessimistic picture of trainees' preparedness to teach in inclusive environments. These studies indicate that around 89 per cent of trainees felt they did not have the confidence to teach children with SEN and/ or disabilities. In 2008, Ofsted (2008) completed research which analysed the quality of pre-service and induction training with respects to SEN and disability in 16 HEIs. Ofsted revealed considerable variations in practice not least in PGCE programmes where they believed that time constraints were undermining the quality of provision. Ofsted were also critical of HEIs who placed too much reliance on schools to provide the majority of their SEN training. Ofsted's findings detailed that trainees often felt ill prepared to teach children with SEN and/or disabilities within inclusive classrooms.

Problematically, the literature base details that the training for the teaching of pupils with SEN is an issue that has inhibited the implementation of strategies in the past. As far back as the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) specialist training was raised as an issue that was stalling the implementation of SEN strategies. Twenty years later the Programme of Action (DfEE, 1998) again indicated the need for teachers to undertake specific training and it has been noted that practice was still inhibited by these same issues (DfES, 2004). It appears despite requests for the training of all teachers in the pedagogy of SEN there remains a feeling that training to date has been woefully inadequate (Corbett, 2001). It appears that if schools are to become inclusive then it is crucial they are enabled to develop an ethos that not only enables all pupils to be supported but also provides for the needs of all teachers as well (Hanko, 2003).

Inclusion: Teachers' attitudes

Another barrier to the evolution of inclusion is teachers' attitudes to its implementation and their competencies to deliver it. Research suggest that whilst teachers support inclusive education they do so with reservation (Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996; Croll & Moses, 2000; Hodkinson, 2005).

Teachers will support inclusion if it relates to children with mild mobility or sensory difficulties (Corbett, 2001). However, teachers do not have the same vision in relation to children who exhibit extreme behavioural difficulties (Hodkinson, 2005; OFSTED, 2004). Research suggests that for these children teachers believe exclusion is necessary purely on practical grounds (Corbett, 2001; Hodkinson, 2006).

The literature suggests 'that while much has changed in our classrooms in relation to inclusion' (Winter, 2006, p. 2) little has changed in the ways that teachers are prepared in relation to SEN (e.g., Barber and Turner, 2007; Forlin and Hopewell, 2006; Jones, 2006; Moran, 2007; Winter, 2006; Vickerman, 2007). Inclusion, in England is stalled because schools are not fit to include all children because of the barriers of lack of knowledge, lack of will, lack of vision, lack of resources and lack of morality (Clough & Garner, 2003).

Research questions

The review of the literature indicates that definitions of inclusion are subject to terminological ambiguity and conceptual confusion. Evidence further suggests that the evolution of this initiative is stalled by teachers' levels of training and their acceptance that all children can be educated within mainstream settings. In an attempt to ascertain whether practitioners are equipped to support inclusive education a small-scale research study was formulated to address three main research questions:

1. How do educational practitioners define inclusive education?
2. What do educational practitioners observe to be the benefits of including all children in mainstream schools?
3. How has inclusion progressed over the past five years?

Method

The sample

For the purposes of the study ten teachers whose experience of teaching in schools ranged from two years to thirty-five years participated in an, in-depth semi-structured interview which lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. During these interviews, questions were asked which ascertained practitioners understanding and perceptions in relation to:

- their definitions of inclusion;
- which children they thought could and could not be included in mainstream schools;
- the benefits of inclusion for the school, the teacher and the pupils; and,
- how inclusion had progressed over the past five years.

Data analysis

The raw data from the research were analysed by the employment of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As such the interview transcripts were subject to open coding from which broad themes emerged within the data. These themes are analysed and discussed in detail below.

Results and Discussion

The study explored the perceptions of teachers in relation to the concept of inclusion. The findings revealed a range of issues that illustrate how the concept of inclusion had been interpreted.

Conceptualising inclusion and determining its benefits

Inclusion, in this research was not solely constructed upon the presence of a child but was grounded within the premise that all should gain benefit from accessing the same learning experience. An experience, as this teacher articulates, which should enrich their lives,

inclusive education is ...including all students that are in a learning environment in the experience and making sure that they get the best out of that experience as is possible....

The teachers although relating that inclusion referred to a range of pupils mainly conceptualised it in terms of children with physical disabilities or behavioural difficulties. Of concern was that for many of these teachers inclusion centred on whether such children could, or indeed should, be included in mainstream education. Whilst we will return to analyse the reasoning behind this exclusionary intent firstly let us unpick the deeper assumptions held by this group of teachers in relation to inclusive education.

Exclusionary inclusion: do teachers actually mean all children?

The further one delved into the transcripts the more it became apparent that although the teachers were versed in inclusion rhetoric the form of inclusion they discussed was not one we recognised readily. The majority of the teachers interviewed possessed at best a conceptual naivety or at worse were employing inclusion rhetoric to cloak exclusionary practices (see Hodkinson 2010, forthcoming for more detail). We discerned only one teacher operating a recognisable form of inclusion. To build our argument consider this teacher's comments; asked to define inclusion they stated, ... 'well I think that every school's duty is to teach the children who turn up at their door isn't it, you know that they are fully part of the school'. These words fit well with those articulated within the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). However, in the interview the teacher undermined their zeal for inclusive practices stating that 'They have full inclusion for assemblies, playtimes and dinners so they are very much part of the school it's just a different class within the school'. Another teacher detailed inclusion as ensuring that all children 'should be taught in mainstream' and have 'access and participation'. In reality though their school operated a separate 'unit' for those children perceived to be difficult to deal with.

Whilst 80% of the teachers defined inclusion as 'including all children' in the learning environment' the transcripts reveal they did not actually mean 'all children'. Many of the schools operated separate behaviour units or sent children for part of the day or for extended blocks of time to special schools.

Another teacher whose school did not operate a unit made clear her feelings that perhaps they should, detailing that,

inclusion breaks down a lot you know because every child has on occasion, you know ... every child should not be in the same classroom... you know you should not be forcing all of these different groups into one classroom.

One teacher who to us operated a recognisable form of inclusion and who had a strong belief in inclusive education revealed this was based upon pragmatism rather than any missionary zeal. 'I take into consideration that to put a child into a special school is a major thing for some people. For me if it's the right place it is not'. It would seem that although at first reference inclusion is seemingly an easy construct to define, in practice it exists within multiple realities. As the teacher above went onto comment, 'I think that it depends upon the type of inclusion you are talking about...'

Inclusion: are schools really changing?

A success criteria of inclusion policy (Hodkinson 2010, forthcoming) was that learning environments should welcome all children (DFES, 2004). Indeed, a major difference between inclusion and integration was that within these new environments the school was to change to accommodate the child needs. The transcripts highlight that the majority of teachers did not understand this accommodation interchange as a central plank of inclusion. A consistent theme was that children should conform to the school's procedures. For example, this teacher's success criterion was dependent upon such, 'Once I had become aware of what this child needed to help him function at a nice calm level ... it wasn't any kind of problem...' Another commented, 'When he came here he was ... he did everything on his own terms ... I wrote a report about him fairly recently I said he had learnt to conform' Furthermore, not to conform was observed by many teachers to be problematic, '... if they do not get that far they are coped with ... and it effects their learning and it effects their social and effects their whole school life'.

For many of the teachers it was not the school that was the key to success but rather the child, or perhaps to be more specific the 'difficulties' the child was displaying. Note for example this comment, 'It's the nature of the child... The child was extremely friendly and pleasant he was not remotely demanding ...'. Or this comment about what makes inclusion successful 'it very much depends upon what they can access and is of benefit to them...'. The data reveal that for many teachers inclusion was not about making changes to their or the school practices. The question this raises is how much difference in reality is inclusion to the previous policy of integration? Only one teacher, was unequivocal about what inclusive education should be based upon, '... not all children can fit into a round hole when they are a square peg and that's the difference and that should be ok'.

We believe that the limited and exclusionary outlook held by the majority of teachers is a sad reflection upon 20 years of inclusive education in England. However, what raised more concern for us was the teacher's reasoning for such exclusionary outlooks.

Exclusionary intent: inclusion undermined?

For the teachers, exclusion was built upon two areas those affecting themselves and those they perceive affected children. The teacher's exclusionary intent centred upon three factors these being; the hard work needed to make inclusion successful, the effect of behavioural issues and the difficulties of operating inclusion within competing policy initiatives.

The vast majority of teachers (70%) indicated that inclusion was problematic because of the 'thought' that had to go into every lesson and the time taken to prepare 'inclusive material'. The teachers' main worry though was not the hard work itself, indeed 50% thought that they had become more efficient in producing learning materials, as this teacher commented,

...over the past few years teachers have been more able to deal with students and they have actually... got off the shelf strategies that work in lessons. I know that has effectively speeded the whole inclusion process up.

The real issue was the effect inclusion was having on the rest of the class. As this teacher articulated '...it is a lot of hard work... I think the other children in the class did not get as much attention...'. Another commented,

I think it can be very time consuming inclusion. If you've got a class of 30 children, if one or two of that class would have not normally in the past been in mainstream school they ... probably take up the majority of their time.

This theme of the negative effect of inclusion is one that raised its head in many forms. For example, whilst teachers perceived children with behavioural difficulties to be an issue to them personally, which led to increased levels of stress and absenteeism, it was the negative impact on the children that was central to their rejection of inclusion. These effects included lessons being ruined, as this teacher recounted, '... the lesson was abandoned because a child with Down's Syndrome was underneath a table screaming at the top of his voice for an hour'. Other teachers stated that inclusive education had been stopped because of the poor discipline of some children which had spread like a contagion within the class,

initially [inclusion] seemed to work well... absolutely stunning ... but then we noticed when the novelty had worn off [they] moved into sporadic BESD [Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties] behaviour. They were quite extreme BESD ...they were under the tables swearing and effing and blinding all of that sort of thing. The ones in the middle went on, they

started to tip over as well. They said if they can get away with it why shouldn't we?

Another issue was that for 40% of the teachers other children in the class were uncomfortable with the inclusion of children with behavioural difficulties. The issue of behaviour as an undermining force to inclusion is a consistent theme in the literature. However, we want to argue that perhaps it was the fear of poor behaviour rather than the actual experience of it that was the real issue behind teacher's exclusionary intent. We make this suggestion because the interviews highlight only three incidents of children behaving badly in class. Questions within the interview asked teachers to highlight incidents where inclusion had been unsuccessful and the reasoning for this. In this data set little mention was made of the issue of behaviour, however, one comment was most illuminating:

A very disruptive child that would perhaps throw things and run around and so on even though they would have a carer. If they you know went off on when it might take you, you know 10 minutes to get your class back down and that is 10 minutes where these children have not learnt anything and so on and if that happened on a regular basis and if I was a parent with a child like that in class I would be concerned that possible it was going to have a knock on effect.

This quote is central to our understanding of the transcripts and forced us to re-analyse the data. This re-analysis revealed that on the occasions when teachers raised the issue of behaviour they were relating this, as in the previous quote, to a hypothetical situation. Whilst the data does not allow us to pursue this analysis any further it does lead us to question the centrality of behaviour as an undermining force to inclusion.

Competing policy agenda: inclusion undermined.

What the transcripts did make clear is that 30% of the participants experienced real issues in making inclusion work whilst at the same time trying to ensure the success of other initiatives. These two comments reveal that inclusion does not sit well with the metrics of accountability we detailed earlier in the paper

... there is a massive disparity between inclusion ... and the targets that the government are setting alongside and I do think that makes inclusion very difficult.

as a teacher you have got this about you, you have got to move your class on all the value added tests etc. You know your time is sort of limited and if you do have a child who demands a certain extra proportion of your time you are aware that perhaps you have not got the other job done.

Our analysis thus far has been depressing as the transcripts revealed how inclusion had not worked. The interviews though did reveal that despite inclusion being difficult, time consuming and at odds with other policy agendas that teachers had made real efforts to make it work.

Inclusion: making progress?

The teachers were asked to express if there had been any changes in the manner in which inclusion was perceived by themselves as well as their schools during the past five years. In the final section of the paper we pursue the experiences of those teachers for whom inclusion had been relatively successful. For these teachers, 'despite being thrown in at the deep end' the inclusion agenda had 'flown' as a result of the training they had received, the sharing of good practice and inclusive education becoming embedded into teachers' daily practices.

The interviews make clear that if inclusion is to work then the school's ethos is important. Throughout the transcripts references were made to the positive attitudes of the school staff which enabled inclusion to progress by delivering better understanding and raising awareness of the importance of this educational initiative. Many teachers stated that inclusion had boosted children with SEN communication, confidence and social skills. Reciprocally, progress had been made because inclusive education had enabled children to develop kindness and empathy broadening their life horizons in terms of respecting and moreover accepting differences in others. The teachers also suggested ways in which inclusion could be made more successful. These suggestions included regular reviews of Individual Education Plans, creative use of funds for training and ensuring that appropriate information on the needs of particular children was made available as early as possible.

Conclusion

The study although small in scale revealed data that enabled us to better understand how inclusive education had been operationalised in schools. We came to realise that inclusion is formed within multiple perspectives and within multiple realities. It is a gaseous, 'fuzzy' and hard to define concept and one which teachers struggled to understand both at the level of theory and in its practical application. Despite, the very real difficulties that this agenda has brought forth, many teachers had wanted to and indeed had tried to make inclusion work for them, their children and their school. They believed that inclusion broadens horizons and raises awareness about children with diverse needs and so enables all children to respect and accept difference.

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